MANAGING EWE CONDITION SCORES PAYS DIVIDENDS

Sheep are programmed for the seasons. Their natural cycle is to produce and gain weight when grass is plentiful and simply maintain themselves when grass is in short supply. Managing the supply of grass throughout the year is, therefore, crucial to profitable lamb production.

Image: Trevor Cook

Leading New Zealand vet and livestock consultant Trevor Cook believes there is potential to maximise the use of grazed grass, without compromising production, if the nutritional requirements of ewes at different times of year are fully understood. He visited Scotland earlier this year and spoke to farmers at six QMS grazing group meetings throughout the country. All the farmers were keen to learn more about how to improve pasture management and optimise livestock production on their own farms.

Michael Blanche, QMS Knowledge Transfer specialist, said: "The correct nutrition of ewes lays the foundation for a successful and profitable flock, and knowing how to condition score is the simplest and most effective way to assess if you are feeding your ewes correctly."

During his trip to Scotland, Trevor demonstrated a quick, effective way of assessing individual Body Condition Score (BCS) in sheep. This technique can be seen in a short video QMS has recently produced on condition scoring.

"Having the skill to make the judgment on the score quickly makes the task simple to carry out. If it's new to you or if you wish to teach the next generation how to assess condition in ewes, the film will help you to become proficient and accurate," said Trevor.

When to Condition Score

"Ideally, condition scoring should take place at two key stages in the production cycle – post weaning and scanning. At both stages, there is an opportunity to identify the ewes that are below target and raise their condition so they can achieve optimum performance."

Post weaning, farmers can draw out ewes with BCS lower than 3. Giving this group the best grass to graze and a minimum of 4cm good quality pasture will provide their energy requirements in order to raise their condition to BCS 3. Budget for eight weeks to move up a condition score, but you can do it in six weeks. At this point, ewes with a score of BCS 4 can actually be put onto poorer grass or used to tidy up paddocks. This will free up more pasture for the leaner ewes or finishing lambs.

Trevor added: "Reducing the number of very poor condition ewes going to the tup will deliver a big lift in scanning results and even eventual lamb performance."

The condition scoring process should be repeated at scanning time, when again ewes below the target of BCS 3 can be drawn out for preferential feeding. Ewes expecting twins or triplets will struggle to consume their nutritional requirements in late pregnancy so often rely on their body reserves as a buffer. The period between scanning and the five weeks prior to lambing is the last chance to put condition onto thin ewes and hence build them up to BCS 3 by lambing time.

"Ewe BCS also has a massive impact on lamb survival. Research has shown that ewes in optimum condition (BCS 3) at lambing give birth to decent-sized lambs, have increased mothering ability, produce more milk and wean heavier lambs with higher survival rates.

"At both these key points of intervention, the farmer has an opportunity to influence the BCS. Make it a target to minimise the number of ewes in your flock with less than BCS 3 at tupping and lambing, and you can expect to see significant increases in profitability," said Trevor.

Ewe Timeline Guide for Farmers

To help farmers manage the condition of their ewes throughout the year, QMS has developed a 'Ewe Nutrition Timeline' poster, which contains a wealth of information about target BCS and feeding levels for ewes throughout the breeding season.

Emily Grant, QMS Grazing Group Co-ordinator, commented:

"The timeline has some really useful information for farmers. It highlights how maintaining condition score and being aware of the ewe's increasing nutritional requirements are important for maximising efficiency and, therefore, profitability."

The timeline also highlights the golden 20 days around tupping when farmers are encouraged to offer ewes the best quality grass to enhance ovulation rates and embryo survival. The timeline can also help farmers select a lambing date to maximise the availability of high-quality spring grass to help drive ewe lactation.

The timeline is aimed at pasture-based lowland or upland flocks lambing at the end of March or later, and is available free of charge from QMS.✚

QMS VIDEO ▶

In this short video Trevor Cook demonstrates a simple way to assess body condition score in ewes. He compared how the short rib bones of each ewe felt, compared with the bones in his own hand.

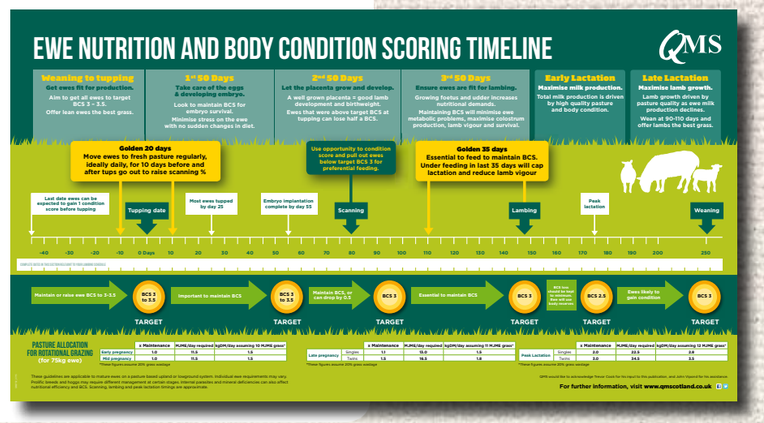
Body Condition score one: The short rib bones feel sharp like the tips of your fingers.

Body Condition score two: The short rib bones feel similar to the points of your knuckles.

Body Condition score three (Ideal): The short rib bones feel similar to the flat part of your knuckles

Body Condition score four: The short rib bones cannot be felt (like the back of your hand)

VIEW THE EWE CONDITIONING SCORE VIDEO AT **WWW.QMSCOTLAND.CO.UK/VIDEO-LIBRARY**

TO REQUEST A FREE "EWE NUTRITION TIMELINE" POSTER, email QMS on info@qmscotland.co.uk or call 0131 472 4040

For more information about ewe condition scoring please visit: **www.qmscotland.co.uk/sheep**